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## Qualitative analysis of selected determinants of occupational stress – results of research conducted on public sector units

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### Summary

The paper analyses occupational stress occurring in three public sector units. The aim of the study was to identify stressors at work and working out solutions conducive to coping with stress present in professional life. Individual in-depth interviews covered 32 employees particularly exposed to strong stressors due to social nature of performed duties. In the course of the conducted research we have identified stressors' sources, determined the perceived stress at work, and then tried to arrange them in the form of specific threats, appropriate for individual groups of studied officials according to their gender, age, education level, work experience and occupied position. Furthermore, we proved the importance of position at work in the human's hierarchy of needs.

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# Qualitative analysis of selected determinants of occupational stress – results of research conducted on public sector units

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## Abstract

The paper analyses occupational stress occurring in three public sector units. The aim of the study was to identify stressors at work and working out solutions conducive to coping with stress present in professional life. Individual in-depth interviews covered 32 employees particularly exposed to strong stressors due to social nature of performed duties. In the course of the conducted research we have identified stressors' sources, determined the perceived stress at work, and then tried to arrange them in the form of specific threats, appropriate for individual groups of studied officials according to their gender, age, education level, work experience and occupied position. Furthermore, we proved the importance of position at work in the human's hierarchy of needs.

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## Introduction

Stress is the body's active response to the demands placed on it and the threats it perceives. It appears as a result of discrepancies between human expectations and the chances of meeting them (Selye, 1978). The literature on the subject distinguishes three basic trends in the determination of psychological stress which identify it

with: stimulus, situation or external event with specific properties; internal human response, especially emotional response in the form of specific feelings and state experienced by a person; the relationship between external factors and human properties (Szopa, Harciarek, 2004).

Occupational stress is a very unfavourable factor when in work. The consequences of stress at the workplace apply to the employee and organisation to the same extent. Stress can not only damage the health of employees, but also contribute to reducing the level of work efficiency as well as lowering the level of contentment and job satisfaction. Occupational stress enjoys an increasing interest of researchers, which is mainly due to the rising costs of experienced stress incurred by both the employees and the organisations employing them (Terelak, 2008; Heszen-Niejodek, 2002; Bartkowiak, 2009). Interdisciplinary research on stress, its causes, manifestations and consequences proves that stress is a pathogenic mechanism with far-reaching consequences. They mainly concern human health, professional effectiveness or psychosocial functioning.

There are groups of employees that are particularly exposed to the risk of being subjected to long-term stress, such as: teachers, medical doctors, nurses, miners or metallurgists. An additional source of burden is connected with the social professions (Majchrzak, 2011). Social services professions are considered strongly burdensome because work consists in constant intensive contact with other people, engaging in their social, psychological and physical problems. This load is a source of constant tension and emotional arousal, which can lead to various negative outcomes. Considering the above criteria, the analysis will cover the group particularly exposed to stressors: employees of public sector units occupying both managerial and non-managerial positions. This group of officials has broad competences and plays an important social role, namely it fulfils the mission of serving the law and implementing social relations organised by law (Jasudowicz, 2005).

## Material and methods

The research was conducted in the last quarter of 2016 and is the first – qualitative part of a broader study on the assessment of the level of perceived stress, job satisfaction and identification of stressors prevailing in public offices. The aim of the study was to determine the impact of stress within the area of experienced states and feelings by 32 employees of three public sector units. In order to achieve this goal, it became necessary to examine: the degree of perceived stress at work, identification and analysis of psychosocial factors of the work environment constituting a significant source of stress, which should be eliminated in the work of the officials. Sources of

perceived stress were then arranged in the form of specific threats, appropriate for individual groups of officials grouped by gender, age, education level, work experience and the position occupied.

Individual in-depth interview (IDI) was used as the research technique. It had a semi structured form. This form of interviewing left the author with a wide range of freedom and methodological flexibility in formulating issues that are of particular analytical interest. The increased area of research impacts has created the opportunity to deepen in particular those empirical data that constituted a significant dimension for respondents and were often also characterised by emotional load (Judzińska, 2013). Questions were asked in accordance with the context of the conversation. The construction of the research tool (scenario of an individual in-depth interview) took into account factors that, according to respondents, can significantly affect the increase and decrease in the level of stress they experience when working in a public office. In order to check the accuracy of qualitative analysis, the collected research material was assessed by two independent competent judges. They used axial coding, which consists in discovering the relationship between analytical categories, searching for common and differentiating features (Jemielniak, 2012). When selecting the data interpretation key, no significant differences in coding were found, nor during material analysis or when drawing conclusions from the analysis. The transcripts examined included 32 recordings of individual in-depth interviews conducted among the employees of the examined offices. The interpreted data provided a partial image and cannot be fully generalised and compared to the entire population of public sector employees. The considerations were supported by other research results presented in the literature. At the same time, the author of this article expresses the hope that the statements of the respondents will at least to a small extent reflect the scientific discourse, constructing a coherent vision of the reality prevailing in the presented groups of officials.

In a result of using a random sample, 12 respondents from one of the Warsaw's public sector units and 10 representatives of public sector units from Łódź and Gdańsk were selected for the study. For the purpose of the work, following group's characteristics were distinguished: gender, age, education level, work experience and the position occupied.

Women predominated in the studied sample (81%). The largest representation in the study belonged to people under 46 years (76%), while groups of employees under 35 years (38%) and from 36 years up to 45 were equally numerous (38%). Due to this distribution of the research sample, a more thorough analysis of the opinions of thirty- and forty-year-olds was possible. Employees from the age group 55+ constituted 16% of the group and the lowest percentage of respondents (9%) was recorded among employees aged 46–55. Regular employees (75%) represented

the most numerous group of respondents. Analyses also covered the different levels of management: senior management (13%), middle management (6%), lower management (6%). The study involved people with varied professional experience measured by the number of years in the office. The groups of the least (working in the office for up to 6 years – 28%) and the most experienced (over 15 years – 31%) employees were comparable in terms of numbers.

## Discussion of the results

### Stressors and causes of stress in professional life

Stress, like emotions, is needed and necessary to live. Overcoming obstacles related to coping with emerging stress in the workplace is something natural and acceptable to every employee. Within the perceptible acceptable level, it allows one to overcome obstacles and gives a sense of satisfaction. Every element that brings tension and discrepancy into life is called a stressor (Strelau, 2007). Stressors can come from the outside world (e.g., work environment), but also from the inside of a person, from their body or psyche, and may finally result from the human-organisational environment relationship (Terelak, 2007). Reviewing the factors – stressors – causing stress at work will allow to systematise them in terms of the official's work in accordance with the assumed objective of the study. Therefore, the respondents were first asked about the factors that are the source of stress in their work on a daily basis. In professional work, stress can be caused by both physical, social and individual components which characterise a given organisation (Waszkowska et al., 2010). Interesting are the sources of stress indicated due to the employee's subjective properties, especially his personality traits, which may intensify the effects of stress or protect against them.

The source of stress for both people employed in managerial and non-managerial positions are their individual personality predispositions, e.g., meticulousness: *"I think it cannot be changed... it just results from my character... my desire for everything to be as good as possible"*. – manager; *"I think so... I am a person who in general is very stressed... It also results from the fact – that I get involved very much in what I do. In short, I think I'm too emotional about what I'm involved in"*. – manager.

Often, regular employees indicate that they also create stressful situations themselves: *"(...) we get negatively excited that we should do this or that... I haven't started it yet... I haven't started it yet..."* – regular employee; *"This is primarily caused by the fact that I really want everything to be done as best as possible and in a timely manner"* – regular employee.

Among the above-mentioned subjective characteristics of the employee, literature assigns a special role to personal and social resources, such as a sense of coherence (Dudek et al., 2001), self-esteem, efficiency, and life optimism (Ogińska-Bulik, 2006; Ogińska-Bulik, Kaflik-Pieróg, 2006) or perceived social support (Cieślak, 1998; Ogińska-Bulik, 2006) and psychological resilience (Rogozińska-Pawelczyk, 2010). The high level of these resources plays the role of a buffer, i.e., it protects employees experiencing stress at work against its negative consequences, including professional burnout and health disorders.

Other causes of stress at work most frequently mentioned during interviews are provided below:

- **Work under time pressure** – timeliness; *“We have to meet the deadlines (...) Deadlines are chasing us, we have to do what is to be done and there is no discussion here... And I have to do all this within 8 hours”*. – manager; *“To complete all the necessary tasks within time planned for a given control”* – regular employee; *“(…) when these things accumulate... there are a lot of them and doubts are beginning to appear in my head whether I will be able to meet the deadline”*. – regular employee.
- **Duties overload**; Duties are usually assessed as “difficult, complicated matters” – regular employee; *“There are days when I sit at this computer non-stop for 8–9 hours”*. – manager *“Lack of mental comfort due to the sheer volume of work”*. – regular employee; *“Overwhelmed by work, too much workload for one person. These tasks are sometimes impossible to complete on time and no one understands this. Too few staff in comparison to the number of tasks and goals set for implementation”*. – regular employee.
- **Multitasking** – a variety of duties; *“There is always anxiety if I am able to organise my work in such a way to meet the deadlines”*. – manager; *“(…) I am stressed when I am dealing with a difficult and complex task”*. – manager.
- **Work overload**; *“A lot of work to be done on time!”* – manager; Employees (including managers) complain that due to the large amount of work, they experience fatigue, which causes more than usual stress. It is important that there were few respondents who used the psychologist’s advice or were treated for depression caused by hard work in the office.
- **No awards for reliable work, low salaries**; *“The biggest stress is the fear of securing the future, ensuring financial comfort. With our earnings, where it is often, let’s say net PLN 1,600, 1,800, it is really bad nowadays. If you have a family to support, even two people with such a salary, this is a very difficult, stressful situation”*. – regular employee; *“No, not everything can be settled with a good word, i.e., you did it well. Sometimes, it would be good to thank the employee financially and it is very bad in this dimension. Employees who are doing well here, unfortunately, I can’t compensate, because, for example, pay raises and promotions are not within the competences of the unit, but all these requests go to the headquarters and it takes time”*. – manager.

- *Too formal and long-term top-down decisions*; “The biggest stress is caused by the fact that my assignments not fully depend from me, but from all my superiors and their superiors. This sluggishness in making decisions is really stressful due to the fact that we work within a certain time frame of the year, (...) When these decisions are not made then it leads to quite dramatic end of the year, like now, when we have some money to spend and we cannot spend it because there are no applications accepted in the system”. – manager; “(...) We are becoming more and more incapacitated in making decisions and at different levels, especially at the director’s level (...) only the number counts, and in our case there is a human behind this number. Decisiveness is a big stressful activity, so also I, de facto, don’t have power”. – manager.
- **Fear of the consequences of actions and decisions taken**; “It stresses me when I do a task for the first time... and at the beginning there is uncertainty... can I handle it (...)”. – manager; “When stress occurs – it is caused by changes in regulations and related situations... various interpretations of these regulations... unestablished interpretation. And additionally an upset customer (...) and me in the opposite who doesn’t quite know the interpretation of some regulation”. – regular employee.
- **Bad work atmosphere** – conflicts at work, bad relationships, not the best atmosphere; “I don’t want to be assigned to one group or the other; I just want to be in a group with everyone”. – regular employee; “There is a lot of competition. I have the impression that everyone is looking at each other”. – regular employee; “ (...) I especially see this atmosphere of competition above all in young people...”. – manager.
- **The need for constant focus/alertness/communication skills**; “There are situations when I have a problem closing a case; alternatively a customer who is very upset, who is not fully oriented (...) will call and then it is difficult for such a person to explain his situation and a conflicting, stressful situation begins”. – regular employee; “Stress related to a difficult case... when, for example, there are problems getting the necessary documents”.
- **Breach of contract/empty promises of superiors**; “I am stressed (...) when I get an order to help someone and then it is upon me that the task has been done wrong”.

The reasons for perceived stress lie mainly in the work environment, but on the other hand they also occur in the individual properties of the surveyed officials, which determine their resistance or susceptibility to stress and the ability to deal with it. There are many common psychosocial factors in the work environment of officials, as well as specific stressors arising from the nature of the work and the place of its performance. The most frequently mentioned are: poor work organisation and bad management, especially in the case of direct superiors. Respondents point to excessive requirements and imprecisely verbalised expectations towards them. An important stressor is also work under time pressure and remuneration inadequate to the effort put into work. Important stressors that must be mentioned include also

moral dilemmas related to the bureaucratic structure and policy of state institutions in which the respondents are employed. Comparing the obtained research results with other research in this area (Coffey et al., 2004; Adams et al., 2006; Collins, 2008), one can state that the prevalence of the above mentioned stressors may be related to the fact that employees do not have adequate work resources, but also personal resources that would make them resistant to stressors and allow them to effectively manage stress. More and more researchers also indicate that there are also psychosocial factors in the work environment of this professional group that help officials to perform their duties and alleviate the symptoms of stress. The main work resources that can be used in the daily work of an official or relieve stress include: job security, regularity of income, the opportunity to improve professional competence, work in accordance with obtained education and good contacts with colleagues and supervisor (Collings, Murray, 1996; Rose et al., 2003).

### Degree of perceived stress

A synthetic review of elementary sources of stress appearing in professional life is a substantive introduction to the area of specific problems related to the analysis of the degree of stress perceived in the workplace. Contemporary professional stress is so strongly experienced that there are many people in the world who are unable to meet the requirements related to the complexity of expectations towards employees, the aspirations of employees themselves or the tension resulting from the fast pace of life. Research conducted in the United Kingdom has shown that every year at least half of the sick leaves are related to diseases caused by stress in the workplace (Terelak, 2007). The results of research by Bartczak and the research team showed that the stress intensity measured using the PSS-10 scale was at an average level (Bartczak, Bartczak, 2010). In turn, Binczycka-Anhocer and Lepiesz (2011), after studying a group of 54 employees stated that almost 60% of respondents struggle with stress at work every day, and 33% experience it once a week.

The majority of respondents (81%) stated that working in public offices is not considered particularly stressful, although of course there are stressful moments. In the next part of the study, the respondents were asked to determine the degree of perceived stress at work on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means that work at the office is non-stressful and 10 means that it is very stressful.

Most respondents perceive average levels of stress. Among them was senior and middle management (4–5). Lower management experiences a slightly higher level of stress (5–6). The highest level of stress (8–9) is experienced by regular employees. One can also note differences in perceiving the level of stress between men and women, and depending on the age of the respondents. Women over 55 years (4–5)



are the least stressed. A little above average level of stress is experienced by middle-aged women and men (between 36 and 45 years), their stress level was 6.

Low level of stress results mainly from the kindness of colleagues, good working atmosphere, positive cooperation, or appreciation of commitment to work: *"I can count on my direct supervisor at any time..."*. – manager; *"Such a low level of stress can also result from the fact that I feel the support of my direct supervisor"*. – manager; *"(... perceived job satisfaction"* – regular employee.

### Solutions leading to a reduction of perceived stress

Preventing and dealing with the negative effects of stress are a prerequisites for maintaining high efficiency and satisfaction with performed work. Undertaking anti-stress activities also has a personal dimension – it is a way to take care of health and proper relations with the environment. Coping with stress is an effort aimed at controlling, reducing or tolerating external or internal demands (Warwas, Rogozińska-Pawelczyk, 2016).

Those who indicated a higher than average level of perceived stress gave examples of specific solutions that could contribute to reducing their stress. The most frequently mentioned include:

- 1) **increase in employment** – *"because there are no hands to work"*;
- 2) **flexible working time** – it is currently possible to work between 7 a.m. and 8 a.m. while respondents would like to be a bit more flexible in their work – *"Now, the employee must come to work at 8; unless there is an important reason for this – a small child, difficult commuting... then he can come to work at 7"*. – regular employee;
- 3) **delegating tasks** – *"(...) difficult matters between individual employees"*. – regular employee – This means that sometimes employees feel a lot of stress due to duties overload, which is not necessarily noticed by superiors. In their opinion, in order to reduce stress, their supervisor should adjust the allocation of duties to specific employees with specific competences and predispositions;
- 4) **increasing the role of the superior in building a positive work atmosphere**. Despite the positive assessment of relationships in teams, respondents still opt for supervisors not to stop caring for good relations between team members and such a patriarchal role is expected by respondents – *"the manager's role is crucial... he should show the initiative to bury the divisions, try to unite people around some common goals"*;
- 5) **direct communication of managers with employees** – *"I go out to employees – talk to them to forget about this stress..."* – manager;
- 6) **top management sending interpretation of regulations with a comment in advance, so that employees can prepare substantively for conversations**

- with clients** – “ (...) *I cannot tell the client that I will have the interpretation of the regulations in a month...*” – regular employee;
- 7) **non-financial motivation by superiors** – “*Motivating employees, letting us understand that we are not the worst, it is true that we also count in our whole machine. Such a good word is also such a big drive to work and to deal with stress*”.  
– regular employee.

Summing up, the surveyed public sector units employees recognised that the most stressful factors can be eliminated by activities related to the way of organising work, motivational aspects of management by direct superiors and increased opportunities for professional development. In addition, the basic competence that needs to be developed in order to be able to influence one's body to reduce the undesirable effects of stress is self-awareness. Research conducted on self-awareness (Krokowski, Rydzewski, 2007) shows that many people are not able to recognise their emotional states or are unaware of the thoughts that are going through their minds, they are unable to indicate the relationship between the feelings or thoughts that are in them, and actions that they undertake under their influence.

## Conclusions

The examined public offices are subject to restrictions, like any state institution, resulting from the ownership structure and the type of tasks performed. Nevertheless – like other public sector units not participating in the study – they are making efforts to improve the quality of management in the spirit of New Public Management.

Qualitative research carried out in the last quarter of 2016 is part of a broader study on the determinants of occupational stress due to the social nature of the duties performed by officials.

Stress accompanies all employees at work, regardless of the type of organisation, however, the respondents of the public offices selected for the study concluded that their work was not considered particularly stressful. Many factors mentioned by employees can be removed through better organisation of work, they include: duties overload, multitasking, deadlines pressure, formalisation and a long time of implementation of top-down decisions. If all this is supplemented by dissatisfaction with low salaries, lack of rewards, including non-financial ones (e.g., words of recognition from the supervisor), then stress measured on a stress scale (scale from 1 to 10, where 1 means that work is not stressful and 10 means that it is very stressful) shows high level for regular employees (8–9), as well as for managers (6–7). The least stressed are women over 55 years (4–5), much less than women and men up to 45 years (their stress level was 6). Therefore, there are discrepancies between the

level of stress experienced by regular employees and persons employed in managerial positions from the lower to the highest level. The latter group of respondents was definitely the least stressed with work in the public office.

The performed qualitative analysis of selected determinants of occupational stress among officials employed in public sector institutions shows that they constitute a group exposed to high risk of psychosocial factors, which is associated with the occurrence of both common as well as specific stressors characteristic of their work environment. The existence of even an average level of occupational stress results mainly from the high exposure to adverse psychosocial factors and the lack of adequate work resources, personal resources, including the competence of managers and regular employees, which would enable better coping with difficult, stressful situations at work. This indicates the need to control and improve the working environment of the surveyed offices. Polish and global publications increasingly often point to the need for targeted selection of officials through the proper recruitment of new staff, ensuring better psychological preparation of graduates, strengthening employee resources through trainings and professional development regarding, e.g., communication, negotiations, ways of coping with stress, strengthening official's desirable and useful personality traits (Paszowska-Rogacz, Brzezińska, 2009; Syper-Jędrzejak, 2016; Cafaro, Sansoni, 2010; Wadsworth et al., 2010). Such actions should become an indispensable element of psychosocial risk management in the work environment of every public sector employee.

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